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Casey Butts In

Since taking office, the Reagan Administration has repeatedly tried to clamp down on the flow of information to the public. It wants to get tough with people who disclose things that the government doesn't want known. It has sought to rein in federal employees by secrecy pledges and lie-detector tests. It has expanded the espionage laws by successfully prosecuting a civilian employee of the Navy for giving "classified" pictures to a defense magazine. And now it is talking about prosecuting the Washington Post, the New York Times, the Washington Times and Time and Newsweek magazines for publishing information about American intelligence activities and methods.

A William Casey, the head of the Central Intelligence Agency, is angry with the Post for disclosing details of American interception of communications between Tripoli and the Libyan People's Bureau in Berlin. Of course, President Reagan himself has spoken of American eavesdropping on those conversations. So what has the Post done to harm the country?

Casey met with two editors of the Post and told them that the paper might be prosecuted if it published another story it has concerning U.S. intelligence. The CIA director told the editors: "I'm not threatening you. But you've got to know that if a you publish this, I would recommend that you be prosecuted under the intelligence statute."

Casey met recently with Deputy Attorney General D. Lowell Jensen to discuss a criminal investigation of all five publications. The White House says it is up to the Justice Department to

decide what to do but that anyone who breaks the law should be prosecuted. The Justice Department should say no.

One problem with the Administration's claim of the need for classification is that governments routinely classify too much. They have a habit of using the stamp "national security" on material that they would rather the public not see.

The leakage of so-called classified information is a regular occurrence, and without it, public discussion of defense matters would be uninformed.

Yet Casey would attempt to staunch this flow of information to the people about important public policy issues. And he chooses the heavy-handed tactic of threatening publications with criminal prosecution for keeping the public informed. The Administration has yet to justify its claims of serious damage to the country from the disclosure of sensitive information.

Often, the Soviets already know what the government is trying to keep secret, so it winds up being kept secret only from the American people.

The Administration can't seem to understand that democratic government requires an informed polity and that this requirement overrides all but the strongest claims of the government to keep information to itself. The people own the government, and not the other way around. The Justice Department should announce forthwith that it will not investigate the Post and the others, and the President should tell Casey not to butt in where he has no business being.